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ABSTRACT

In 1991 the Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., funded three elementary schools to design and implement a comprehensive early childhood education program. This funding initiative, entitled "Excellent Beginnings," supports programs that include innovative curriculum and classroom-management strategies, extensive parent participation, the use of high school mentors and college interns, and the development of systems to provide medical, psychological, and other social services to children and their families. Evaluation took place over a three-year period at the program sites: Midtown West Elementary School, New York City (New York) (Learning for Life), Fairfield Court Elementary School, Richmond (Virginia) (Fantastic Follow Through), and Lincoln Center, Ruston (Louisiana) (Project LINC). Overall conclusions are that implementation was consistent with the program vision and that the funding was a catalyst for positive change. Individual differences among the sites strongly influenced implementation efforts and outcomes. Although some elements of the model are difficult to implement and require technical assistance, this initial evaluation suggests beneficial effects on students. (SLD)

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Excellent Beginnings

Evaluation Of Phase I (1991-1994)

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By Alan Brickman
Levine Associates
Brookline, Massachusetts

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In Richmond, increases in student test scores were documented over the three year period of the grant. In Ruston, the percentage of students promoted to the next grade level were significantly higher than during the years preceding Excellent Beginnings. In New York, high percentages of students successfully achieved the school's seven key learning outcomes during the three years of the grant. These findings are impressive and important.

*— Alan Brickman
Partner, Levine Associates
Excellent Beginnings Head Evaluator*

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Project implementation in these three sites generated significant positive changes in teaching practice, parent involvement, school-community relations, and school image and reputation.

Executive Summary

In 1991, the Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. funded three elementary schools to design and implement a comprehensive early childhood education program. Through this funding initiative, entitled *Excellent Beginnings*, the Plan seeks to support programs that include innovative curriculum and classroom management strategies, extensive parent involvement, the utilization of high school mentors and college interns, and the development of a system for providing medical, psychological, and other social service support to children and their families.

On the basis of an extensive evaluation of project implementation and impact in these sites over a three year period, the following overall conclusions are offered:

Project implementation was consistent with the vision of Excellent Beginnings. The central elements of the vision expressed by the Plan for Social Excellence include efforts designed to foster self-esteem, the utilization of innovative and developmentally appropriate curriculum and classroom management techniques, and a strong emphasis on collaboration, especially with parents. These were incorporated into project design and implementation in the three sites of the project.

Funding from the Plan for Social Excellence was a catalyst for positive change. Project implementation in these three sites generated significant positive changes in teaching practice, parent involvement, school-community relations, and school image and reputation. In addition, funding from the Plan for Social Excellence leveraged a substantial amount of activity and involvement from other sources in the local communities.

A more formal, standardized, and systematic approach to documenting project outcomes is necessary in order to fully understand the relationship between specific activities and their impact on students and families.

The structures, resources, and history of the individual sites had a major impact on project implementation and outcomes.

The local environmental context for implementation includes: the demographics of the host school; structures and resources of the school, the school system, and the community; and the history and track record of the school in developing and sustaining innovative programs. Together, these can have a profound impact on the implementation and effectiveness of the project. A careful analysis of these factors is important in the selection of future sites.

Collaboration is essential for success. If any local site hopes to achieve the comprehensive vision of Excellent Beginnings, it must develop substantive and productive collaborations with a number of community institutions and constituencies. Key among these are parents, institutions of higher education, and health care and other social service providers.

Some elements of the model are difficult and their implementation requires significant technical assistance. Some aspects of the parent involvement and family service components are especially difficult to implement fully and effectively. Sites need expert technical assistance and training in order to design and conduct these components at a level that can generate real results.

There is evidence of the project's positive impact on students, but more research is required. The three sites generated some qualitative and quantitative data about the positive impact of the project on student motivation, engagement, self-esteem, behavior, and achievement. However, a more formal, standardized, and systematic approach to documenting project outcomes is necessary in order to fully understand the relationship between specific activities and their impact on students and families.

This evaluation report is based on extensive data gathered and analyzed by independent Site Evaluators and compiled and synthesized by a project-wide Head Evaluator. The report contains extensive information about the implementation and impact of Excellent Beginnings in the three initial sites. The overall conclusions presented above reflect the most significant and important themes of the evaluation, and are intended to serve as a framework for the consideration of the report's findings and conclusions in their full detail.

This report is intended for general distribution. There will be a more detailed evaluation report that can serve as a practical guide for communities exploring the development of their own Excellent Beginnings project.

Major Findings:

- ▶ *Project implementation was consistent with the vision of Excellent Beginnings.*
- ▶ *Funding from the Plan for Social Excellence was a catalyst for positive change.*
- ▶ *The structures, resources, and history of the individual sites had a major impact on project implementation and outcomes.*
- ▶ *Collaboration is essential for success.*
- ▶ *Some elements of the model are difficult and their implementation requires technical assistance.*
- ▶ *There is evidence of the project's positive impact on students, but more research is required.*



Sites were selected on the basis of the quality and completeness of their project proposals...and the existing activities, structures, resources, and linkages at the local level that would support successful implementation.

Background And Methodology

The Vision of Excellent Beginnings and the Selection of Project Sites

The Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. (the "Plan") is a private foundation established for the purpose of bringing about positive and measurable improvements in the areas of education and the environment. Through its Excellent Beginnings program, the Plan seeks to fund early childhood education programs (i.e. those serving ages three to seven years) that:

- provide an innovative instructional and service delivery approach,
- recognize the existence and importance of diversity among students in their early childhood years,
- include a strong emphasis on parent involvement and training,
- prepare students for success in elementary school through enhanced self-esteem, knowledge of basic skills, and a positive attitude toward learning.

Through a formal application process described in a detailed request-for-proposals (RFP) issued in 1990, the Plan invited schools to submit proposals for early childhood education initiatives that included a number of specific components:

The Plan sought to attract project proposals that emphasized a number of key areas: collaboration (between school faculty and parents, between a school and its community, among teachers, etc.); and the development of comprehensive, multi-faceted, and innovative strategies for meeting the needs of children and families; the development of programs with specific objectives and measurable results.

- innovative curriculum and classroom management strategies that respond to the individual needs of children and that build self-esteem, basic skills, and a positive attitude toward learning;
- a well-organized and comprehensive plan for the productive and meaningful involvement of parents in their children's education (including the typically "hard-to-reach" parents), that incorporates both home-based and school-based educational support activities, as well as participation in advocacy activities related to school policy and governance;
- a program of high school mentors and college interns, with an emphasis on recruiting and placing minority males, who can serve as role models as well as educators;
- a plan for teacher training and professional development, which is implemented in collaboration with a local institution of higher education;
- the development of a network of community-based and/or governmental agencies that would provide medical, psychological, and other social service support to the children and their families.

The Plan sought to attract project proposals that emphasized a number of key areas: collaboration (between school faculty and parents, between a school and its community, among teachers, etc.); the development of comprehensive, multi-faceted, and innovative strategies for meeting the needs of children and families; and the development of programs with specific objectives and measurable results (regarding both program development and direct service outcomes).

Three school-based early childhood education programs were selected for funding under Excellent Beginnings. These sites were selected on the basis of the quality and completeness of their project proposals; the degree to which their expressed plans were consistent with the vision of the Plan and the guidelines and requirements of Excellent Beginnings; and the existing activities, structures, resources, and linkages at the

local level that would support successful implementation. The Plan has provided funding to these three sites over a three-year period. The three Excellent Beginnings programs that received funding from the Plan for Social Excellence are:

- Fantastic Follow Through at the Fairfield Court Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia;
- Project LINC (Lincoln Institutions Networking for Children) at the Lincoln Center in Ruston, Louisiana;
- Learning for Life at the Midtown West Elementary School in New York City, New York.

The Purposes and Process of the Evaluation

The Plan for Social Excellence is committed to documenting and evaluating the activities undertaken by its grantees as a central aspect of its mission and approach. With regard to the evaluation of Excellent Beginnings, the specific purposes of the evaluation include:

- to generate a detailed understanding of the implementation and impact of the project over the past three years;
- to inform decision making about funding the three sites for a second three-year cycle;
- to facilitate and support replication of the project in additional sites;
- to support the efforts of the Plan for Social Excellence to attract funding and other resources for the enhancement and expansion of Excellent Beginnings.

The Plan for Social Excellence is committed to documenting and evaluating the activities undertaken by its grantees as a central aspect of its mission and approach.

Each of the three sites selected a local evaluator who was to assess the implementation and impact of the project over the three-year period of the grant. The Site Evaluators were:

- Dean C. Andrew (Ruston, LA);
- James H. McMillan (Richmond, VA);
- Joseph C. Grannis, with Richard Sawyer (New York City).

The Plan for Social Excellence selected Alan Brickman of Levine Associates in Brookline, Massachusetts as Head Evaluator. The Head Evaluator's role included establishing the standard format for the site evaluations, providing advice and support to the Site Evaluators, compiling their findings, drawing out key themes, and preparing the final project-wide evaluation documents.

The Site Evaluators were asked to gather and analyze both quantitative and qualitative measures of project implementation and impact. Each undertook the following data gathering activities: a detailed review of available documents and records related to project implementation; observations of classroom and other activities at the school; and, numerous interviews and focus groups with many individuals representing the project's key constituent groups (including parents, teachers, school and district administrators, community collaborators, high school mentors, college interns, etc.).

This report has been prepared for general distribution. There will be a second, longer and more detailed report that is designed specifically for use by communities and/or institutions considering replication of the project. That report will include detailed, practical information about the experience and lessons of project implementation in the three initial Excellent Beginnings sites.

The Site Evaluators were asked to gather and analyze both quantitative and qualitative measures of project implementation and impact.

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The Local Environmental Context For Project Implementation

Overview

The site evaluation reports include substantial information on the local context within which each project developed and functioned. Such information is extremely valuable to communities considering replication of the project in understanding the specific factors that support or block successful implementation. The elements of the relevant context that have been included in detail in the site evaluations include:

- the demographics of both the school population and the community;
- a general characterization of the neighborhood or community from which the students have been drawn;
- the history and current status of the host school;
- a general characterization of the host school system;
- the capacity and limitations of the various participating community institutions.

Brief narrative descriptions of the sites are presented in this section. These descriptions are intended to provide the reader with a framework in which to understand the observations and conclusions that are presented in various sections of the report.

Learning for Life, Midtown West Elementary School (New York City)

Midtown West School is a magnet/option school, which includes a pre-kindergarten class as well as kindergarten through grade 5, located on the west side of midtown Manhattan. This neighborhood has traditionally been known as "Hell's Kitchen" but has more recently adopted the name "Clinton" in an attempt to convey a more up-scale image. The area directly surrounding the school has a mix of commercial and residential establishments, ranging from large law offices to subsidized artist's housing. Despite occasional incidents of crime all too typical of large American cities, the neighborhood is considered relatively safe during school hours when compared to other areas of New York City.

The school shares a five-story building with two other schools: the Hudson River Middle School and the Professional Performing Arts School. The Learning for Life Center occupies one room that was recently renovated and painted by the parents.

As a magnet school, Midtown West is required to maintain a balance of white and nonwhite students. Two-thirds of the students live in the surrounding areas, but fully one-third must travel, or are brought, substantial distances to attend the school. Over the course of the three years of Excellent Beginnings, the school has had a student body whose racial and ethnic composition has been virtually unchanged: approximately 40% white, 30% Hispanic, 25% black, and 5% Asian. The diversity of the student body transcends the categories reported above, and includes many children of bi-racial or bi-cultural families. The school has cultivated and emphasized its ethnic and cultural diversity.

Midtown West families are also diverse economically. One-third of the children are eligible for free lunch, as compared to neighboring public elementary schools where eligibility can be as high as 90%. It is estimated that between 80% and 90% of Midtown West parents are employed. Although this restricts the school-related activities of many mothers and fathers, the

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school has, since its inception, emphasized active parental participation.

Midtown West was formed in 1989 as a partnership between New York Community School District 2 and the Bank Street College of Education. Bank Street (which is comprised of a children's school, a graduate school, and an extended education division) has a number of projects in the City's schools and is cultivating a national leadership role in the preparation of teachers for urban schools.

Midtown West began with three classes for four and five year olds. Since then, one grade or more has been added per year in order that the initial students could remain in the school over a longer period. A new Director/Principal, Saudhi Vargas, was hired after the 1990-91 school year. During her tenure, she has sought to upgrade the school's academic image while maintaining its developmental, student-centered philosophy. Parent involvement has been extremely strong throughout the history of the school. There is an active Parents Association with a formally elected leadership and active committees.

The impression one gets of Midtown West after spending time in the school is that of a diverse, bustling, and creative place. There is a feeling that the children, parents, teachers, and the community are sharing an exciting and meaningful experience.

Fantastic Follow Through, Fairfield Court Elementary School (Richmond)

Fairfield Court Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia includes a Head Start classroom, a kindergarten and grades 1 through 5. The school draws students almost exclusively from a public housing community where, in the bleak words of one school document, "unemployment and underemployment stifle opportunities for breaking the poverty barriers...the social ills of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, and child and spousal abuse are prevalent in the community." In the area

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surrounding the school and the nearby housing community, there are recurrent incidents of violent crime, and the students and their families must face many of the economic and social difficulties associated with low-income, urban environments.

Approximately 75% of students at Fairfield Court are from single parent (or in some cases, single grandparent) families, and the mean income of families is extremely low: \$10,272 annually. Over 90% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches. The student body of Fairfield Court Elementary School is 99% black.

Principal Carolyn Spurlock was hired in 1990-91 and implemented a number of policies and procedures for student retention that enabled a greater percentage of children to earn promotion. Prior to Excellent Beginnings, Fairfield Court had been implementing the High Scope Curriculum in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. This approach is an extension of the Head Start and Follow Through models and is designed to enhance student engagement and interest in learning.

For many years, the school has employed Parent Educators to work in classrooms and conduct home visits to parents. There are also several other innovative programs linking Fairfield Court and the community that existed prior to Excellent Beginnings: most notably Lunch Buddies (adult and high school volunteers who each have lunch with a student twice a month) and the Astoria Pals (senior citizens who volunteer as mentors and classroom aides). The Principal regards Excellent Beginnings as one of a number of initiatives that comprise the school's overall educational program.

There is a business-like seriousness with which the students, teachers, parents, and volunteers approach their tasks each day at Fairfield Court, and there is the discernible hum of productive activity.

Project LINC, Lincoln Center (Ruston)

Project LINC is located in the Lincoln Center, a small brick school with big windows and high fences, in Ruston, Louisiana. Ruston is a city of 20,000 in rural Lincoln Parish¹ in the hill country of north central Louisiana. While the surrounding community is approximately 60% white and has shown little overall demographic change in the past ten years, Lincoln Center was nearly 100% black in 1991-92. The school has had a longstanding reputation as a "black" institution.

Few Lincoln Center children live in "traditionally" structured families and up to 95% are considered to be "at-risk" due to their socio-economic status. Interestingly, the student mix in the third year of Excellent Beginnings changed to 60% black, reflecting a dramatic shift in student intake. (The factors that have contributed to this shift are discussed later in this report. See Project Impact and Outcomes section.)

The demographic profile of Lincoln Parish contrasts somewhat with that of Lincoln Center. The average educational level of the families in the parish is higher than that found in Louisiana and the United States as a whole, due to the presence of two major universities: Louisiana Tech University and Grambling State University. Unemployment in the parish has been quite low: 3.5% in 1992. Violent crime rates over the past four years are also low. While it can not be said that the region is booming, it is relatively stable with low crime and low unemployment.

Lincoln Center is a unique, mixed-use facility, which has housed preschool, kindergarten, special education, and alternative secondary education programs since 1971-72. Ray Bratton, Principal of Lincoln Center and the administrator responsible for all these components, has provided genuine leadership and has effectively integrated the many diverse activities of Lincoln Center into a cohesive unit.

Few Lincoln Center children live in "traditionally" structured families and up to 95% are considered to be "at-risk" due to their socio-economic status.

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¹ A parish in Louisiana is equivalent to a county in other states.

Observations and Conclusions Regarding the Impact of Local Context

There are a number of findings regarding the impact of the local environment on project implementation that are particularly instructive for communities considering replication of the project as well as for the Plan for Social Excellence as it selects additional sites for funding. These findings include:

- Because the Excellent Beginnings framework involves non-traditional instructional approaches, an unusually strong emphasis on parent involvement, and service delivery linkages between schools and external organizations, a school's history of educational innovation and openness to change can contribute to setting the stage for successful implementation.
- Implementation of all aspects of Excellent Beginnings requires substantially more resources, financial and other, than can or will be provided by the Plan for Social Excellence. Therefore, the capacity and experience of the school system, the higher education institution, and the community agencies to attract funds that can be allocated to Excellent Beginnings is a must. Budget cuts from the participating municipality and other types of fiscal constraints faced by the community partners can be significant barriers to implementation, and may not be foreseeable over the course of a three-year grant cycle.
- In programs such as Excellent Beginnings that include a strong focus on establishing new standards of classroom practice through a program of teacher training and professional development, the stability of the faculty is a key element of success. Significant turnover of either teachers or administrators can disrupt project implementation.

Budget cuts from the participating municipal entity and other types of fiscal constraints faced by the community partners can be significant barriers to implementation.

- Successful parent involvement requires the development of mechanisms for communication with parents and vehicles for their involvement in school governance and policy-level decision making. The implementation of this aspect of the project is smoother and more effective if the existing mechanisms for school-related decision making can easily incorporate parent involvement strategies that are consistent with the vision of Excellent Beginnings.

Observations:

- ▶ *A school's track record regarding educational innovation and openness to change can effectively set the stage for successful implementation.*
- ▶ *The capacity and experience of the partners (the school system, the higher education institution, and the community agencies) to attract funds that can be allocated to Excellent Beginnings is a must.*
- ▶ *The stability of the faculty is a key element of success. Significant turnover of either teachers or administrators can disrupt project implementation.*
- ▶ *Successful parent involvement requires the development of mechanisms for communication with parents and vehicles for their involvement in school governance and policy-level decision making.*



The Learning for Life Advisory Committee and the Midtown West Steering Committee have emerged as effective forums for communication and mediation among the diverse constituencies of the school.

Project Structure And Governance

Overview

Information regarding the structures, mechanisms, and procedures for the governance and oversight of the project in each of three sites is extremely valuable for communities considering replication.

The relevant and useful information regarding project structure and governance includes:

- the overall deployment of human resources related to the project;
- the established and authorized vehicles for project planning and decision making;

The basic structure for each of the three Excellent beginnings projects is summarized below:

Learning for Life, Midtown West Elementary School (New York City)

Over the past three years, the staffing for Learning for Life has included the following positions:

- **Project Director** (originally two Co-Directors): responsible for overall project coordination, supervision of other staff, contract management, and liaison to various key individuals and groups;

The part-time nature of many of these responsibilities required that specific individuals assume several roles, and in addition job descriptions underwent significant reconfiguring each year.

- **Professional Development Coordinator:** responsible for teacher and parent training;
- **Counselor/Family Service Coordinator:** responsible for counseling and referring individual parents, coordinating the family services component, and liaison with community agencies;
- **Spanish Teacher:** included in the original Learning for Life proposal, but eliminated due to budget reductions in 1993-94;
- **ESL/Cultural Connections Facilitator:** began as ESL instruction for parents, but evolved into coordinating cultural awareness festivals and other similar activities;
- **Program Coordinator:** responsible for coordinating parent activities in the Learning for Life Center, and other activities as directed by the Project Director;
- **Mentor Advisor:** responsible for the recruitment, screening, orientation, and support of the high school mentors.

Roberta Altman, a faculty member at Bank Street College, has been the Project Director for the entire three years of the Excellent Beginnings grant. However, over these same three years, there has been significant instability in the rest of the staff, resulting in part from budget cuts and staff turnover. In addition, the part-time nature of many of these responsibilities required that specific individuals assume several roles, and in addition job descriptions underwent significant reconfiguring each year. These changes have presented great challenges for the school as a whole as well as for the implementation of the various Excellent Beginnings components.

The governance structure has been equally complex. The various bodies that had some role in the governance and coordination of Learning for Life have included:

- **Learning for Life Advisory Committee:** convened specifically to coordinate the project, with representation from all relevant constituencies;

- **Midtown West Steering Committee:** established in 1993-94 to facilitate a greater level of shared decision making for the school as a whole;
- **Staff Meetings:** these regular planning sessions of the faculty have a significant impact on Midtown West and on Learning for Life activities;
- **Partnership Committee:** a monthly gathering designed to coordinate the relationship between Midtown West and Bank Street College;
- **Parents Association:** in existence since the school's inception, the vehicle for parent involvement in school policy and governance, includes a Coordinating Committee and a wide range of other standing committees.

Governance that promotes inclusion of all constituencies, even in such a small school, can be difficult. While the Learning for Life governance structure is complicated, and includes a variety of groups that have overlapping memberships and agendas, the Learning for Life Advisory Committee and the Midtown West Steering Committee have emerged as effective forums for communication and mediation among the diverse constituencies of the school.

Fantastic Follow Through, Fairfield Court Elementary School (Richmond)

While the reporting lines and decision making authority of project staff is informal and not clearly defined or articulated, the project is functioning effectively and operates smoothly. In addition to the Principal of Fairfield Court Elementary School, there are three main administrators of Fantastic Follow Through. These are:

- **Project Director:** Affiliated with the school system's central administration, Project Director Ron Robertson is able to serve as an effective liaison between the school and the funding agency, the school district, and the community. The Project Director assumes responsibility

While the reporting lines and decision making authority of project staff is informal and not clearly defined or articulated, the project is functioning effectively and operates smoothly.

The research team has evolved into a project advisory committee that serves as a forum for reviewing project activities, sharing concerns, and planning program activities.

for overall coordination of project components and contract management, but defers to the Principal regarding regular project management and decision making in order to maintain a strongly school-based orientation.

- **Home/School Coordinator:** The Home/School Coordinator is based in the school and assumes responsibility for the day-to-day administration of project activities, including the supervision of the Parent Educators and the high school mentors. She reports formally to the Principal, and unofficially to the Project Director, but administers the project with relatively little guidance or input from either.
- **Project Facilitator:** The Project Facilitator is paid by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) to work closely with all project participants, including parents, to coordinate a research team. The research team has evolved into a project advisory committee that serves as a forum for reviewing project activities, sharing concerns, and planning program activities.

Authority for project governance is clearly centralized within the group of administrators described above, and is relatively informal. There are daily and weekly meetings of the Project Director, Home/School Coordinator and Project Facilitator, and regular meetings of the Project Director, Principal and Home/School Coordinator. As described above, the Research Team has developed an advisory role, and is the only broadly representative body with a role in overall coordination and governance of the project.

Project LINC, Lincoln Center (Ruston)

In the first year of the grant, Project LINC employed a number of consultants, whose activities were coordinated by Project Director Janie Humphries in the areas of parent involvement, liaison with community agencies, and curriculum development. In years two and three, the project built its own complete program staff as follows:

- **Project Director:** responsible for overall project coordination, liaison with the university partner and other community agencies, coordination of the Project LINC Advisory Council, contract management, and the provision of training to parents, teachers, mentors, and interns;
- **Parent Center Director and Assistant Project Director:** responsible for oversight of parent involvement activities, liaison with the high school regarding the mentor program, and assistance with general project coordination and planning;
- **Parent Educator:** responsible for implementation of parent involvement activities, including coordination, training, support, etc.;
- **High School Mentor Coordinator:** responsible for recruitment, selection, coordination, and support of the high school mentors;

Principal Ray Bratton is responsible for communication with Project Director regarding program recommendations and identifying areas of concern, and assisting with coordination of various program components.

The Principal and the Project Director take responsibility for overall project governance and decision making, with active input and involvement from the other staff listed above. In addition, a LINC Advisory Council has been convened to provide advice and input on project activities. Individuals were selected for the Advisory Council because of their interest in the school and in the project, and for the special skills and/or perspective they could bring to the group.

Three subcommittees of the Advisory Council were established, each with responsibility for developing recommendations for improving Project LINC's outreach and collaboration with a specific constituency. These subcommittees are: Parent Involvement Committee, Business/Community Relations Committee, and Public Agencies and School Relations Committee.

A LINC Advisory Council has been convened to provide advice and input on project activities. Individuals were selected for the Advisory Council because of their interest in the school and in the project.

Observations and Conclusions Regarding Project Structure and Governance

There are a number of conclusions presented in the site evaluations regarding project structure and governance. In this report, we have highlighted two key areas of findings:

- the overall nature of the project's structure;
- the role of the Project Director.

The structures of the three projects and the related mechanisms for decision making and governance are described as complex and multi-faceted, complicated and hard-to-understand, and somewhat informal.

Overall Nature of Project Structure: It is noteworthy that in the site evaluation reports, the structures of the three projects and the related mechanisms for decision making and governance are described as complex and multi-faceted, complicated and hard-to-understand, and somewhat informal. This seems to be a result of the attempt to establish new structures and procedures (especially for parents) and then to mesh these with the existing vehicles for school governance and decision making. In each of the sites, the systems and structures for project governance went through several developmental stages, as evidenced by the changing responsibilities of specific individuals and the evolving roles of various committees.

Role of the Project Director: There are a number of variables regarding the Project Director that appear to have a significant impact on the effectiveness of project implementation. These variables and their related impact are presented below:

- A key variable in the design and implementation of the Project Director position is the amount of time this person has allocated to Excellent Beginnings activities. In the three sites, this ranged from one day per week to approximately 70% time. The greater the time allocated to the project, the more complete and effective role the Project Director can play.
- Another important variable with significant ramifications is the organizational affiliation of the Project Director. This person can be affiliated either with the host school district or with the higher education partner. University

affiliation provides greater resources for teacher training and a more consistent link with the higher education institution, while school district affiliation can generate greater cooperation and flexibility on the part of school personnel.

- Lastly, the specific skills and inclinations of the Project Director, and the related evolution of their responsibilities, is a key factor. The Project Director can be primarily an educator or an educational resource person and thus focus their efforts on teacher and parent training as well as providing access to other curriculum and staff development resources. Alternatively, he or she can be an administrator or facilitator and thereby provide leadership and coordination for all the project participants and components. Or, as in one of the sites, they can give substantial, balanced attention to both roles.

Observations:

- ▶ *In each of the sites, the systems and structures for project governance went through several developmental stages, as evidenced by the changing responsibilities of specific individuals and the evolving roles of various committees.*
- ▶ *A key variable in the design and implementation of the Project Director position is the amount of time this person has allocated to Excellent Beginnings activities. In the three sites it ranged from one day per week to approximately 70% time.*
- ▶ *Another important variable with significant ramifications is the organizational affiliation of the Project Director. This person can be affiliated either with the host school district or with the higher education partner.*
- ▶ *The specific skills and inclinations of the Project Director, and the related evolution of their responsibilities, is a key factor.*



Opening the schools to the involvement of parent volunteers, and providing parents with the training and confidence to volunteer effectively, has been an extraordinary accomplishment of Excellent Beginnings.

Project Activities And Accomplishments

Overview

In their reports, the Site Evaluators provide in-depth descriptions of project activities and accomplishments, with a focus on both *what* was accomplished and *how* it was accomplished. The description and assessment of both the process and product of Excellent Beginnings program implementation can contribute important insights into the replication of the project in additional sites.

Brief descriptions of the implementation of the key program components of Excellent Beginnings are presented below, followed by a synthesis of observations and conclusions regarding project implementation.

Curriculum and Staff Development

Learning for Life worked in conjunction with Bank Street College staff to create and revise curriculum for the project. Learning for Life curriculum consisted of a "constructivist" approach (i.e. a framework in which students build skills and understandings based on their shared experience and specific problem solving activities) with an emphasis on gender equity and multiculturalism. Unified, "thematic" lessons focused on family, neighborhood, and city to provide a relevant context for student learning. Learning for Life generated many striking

Curriculum materials selected by project staff were reported to be very helpful in individualizing assignments for students and training parents to provide home-based support for their children.

examples of student collaboration and shared problem solving. Parents had a strong involvement in suggesting and developing curriculum as well.

In addition to conducting numerous training workshops for teachers, the Project Director observed classrooms and provided extensive one-on-one coaching and technical assistance to individual teachers. The school provided teachers with release time to visit and observe other schools. Teachers regularly worked together in teams, met with the Project Director and the Director of Midtown West, or engaged in a partnership exchange program with similar grade-level teachers from the Bank Street School for Children. The Learning for Life staff development effort focused on collaboration among teachers as a vehicle for developing teaching skills.

Fantastic Follow Through implemented and expanded its High Scope Curriculum to emphasize student choice of activities and materials, learning centers (sometimes called "centers of interest"), and hands-on activities. Curriculum materials selected by project staff were reported to be very helpful in individualizing assignments for students and training parents to provide home-based support for their children.

Fantastic Follow Through offered several teacher training workshops during the first year of the project. In years two and three, staff development was offered on an informal basis through project meetings and a yearly conference. However, there has not been a formally structured and ongoing program of staff development focusing on the objectives of Excellent Beginnings.

Project LINC implemented the classroom model developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which emphasizes hands-on and group experiences. NAEYC guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) were utilized by LINC teachers with assistance from the Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC) of Louisiana Tech University. Key aspects of the curriculum include age and individually appropriate curriculum, learning as an interactive process with real world content and connections, and student choice of activities.

The Early Childhood Education Center has served as the primary training site for Project LINC teachers. Project LINC actively encouraged teachers to attend monthly in-service training opportunities that have included workshops, professional meetings and visits to other programs and classes. Teachers have regularly attended training at ECEC and received hands-on experience in developing instructional materials for their students. In addition, the Project Director has provided group training and individual coaching for teachers at Lincoln Center.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement can take many forms. Parents can support the work of teachers by serving as classroom volunteers or by assisting their children with assignments at home. They can provide advisory input regarding school programs and can advocate for specific policies and practices at both the school and district level. Parents can themselves be learners, and can be provided with instruction in basic skill areas or training about topics such as child development, health and nutrition, and the like.

The strength of a parent involvement effort can be judged by the degree to which it recognizes and addresses the full range of parents' needs. Comprehensive programs must recognize parents as educators, as advocates, and as learners. The parent involvement activities in these three categories that were undertaken by the sites are described below:

Parents as Learners: Workshops were offered once or twice per month for parents at all three programs. Attendance at workshops was similar between programs, averaging between ten and fifteen parents, though it is not clear if there was a core group of attenders or if a broader base of parents was involved. Topics were recommended by both teachers and parents, and focused on child development and/or school-related issues as well as topics of general interest such as personal finance. For all three groups, the scheduling of meetings and workshops had a significant impact on attendance.

Project LINC actively encouraged teachers to attend monthly in-service training opportunities that have included workshops, professional meetings, visits to other programs and classes, etc.

Fantastic Follow Through, for example, had well over 100 parents volunteering an average total of 3,350 hours of service per year.

At Learning for Life it was estimated that parents of nearly 75% of the children have been involved this past year as classroom volunteers in some way.

Fantastic Follow Through augmented the training that was provided to parents with a program of home visits conducted by Parent Educators. The Parent Educators are assigned two classes each and visit the homes of the students in these classes, successfully meeting with a remarkable 90% of parents. The model calls for a home visit to every parent twice each month. Through these visits, parents are helped with parenting skills and informed about their children's progress. The central function of the home visits is to help parents better understand how they can have a positive influence on the child's education. The home visits have also been used as an outreach tool through which parents are encouraged to become involved in other school activities.

Parents as Educators: In all three sites, parent workshops and other meetings have been designed, in part, to promote other types of parent involvement, including classroom volunteering. Opening the schools to the involvement of parent volunteers, and providing parents with the training and confidence to volunteer effectively, has been an extraordinary accomplishment of Excellent Beginnings.

Fantastic Follow Through, for example, had well over 100 parents volunteering an average total of 3,350 hours of service per year. Teachers at Fairfield Court report that about half the parents volunteer at some point during the year.

At Learning for Life it was estimated that parents of nearly 75% of the children have been involved this past year as classroom volunteers in some way. The Learning for Life Center was built with the help of parent volunteers.

Project LINC trained parents as volunteer Home Visitors to introduce new parents to LINC and offer suggestions on how parents can enhance their child's success in school. One outcome of the Home Visitors was a significant positive shift in the reputation of the school. The parent volunteers, coupled with some positive press coverage, were largely responsible for spreading the word about Project LINC in the community.

Parents as Advocates: The degree to which project activities expanded the role of parents as advocates depended upon each

school's history of parent advocacy and the "culture" of the school related to shared decision making.

The implementation of Learning for Life was a strong catalyst for increased parent participation. Even though parent involvement has been a central theme of the school since its inception, the various avenues for participation continue to change and develop. During the implementation of Excellent Beginnings, parents greatly influenced curriculum development at the school. For example, open forums on multiculturalism were held in both the Project Advisory Committee and Midtown West Steering Committee so that parents could have input into this important aspect of classroom practice. Learning for Life parents have suggested developmental benchmarks for student progress, and initiated a parent-teacher research project to study student assessment. The influence of the Midtown West Parents Association and its committees on virtually all aspects of the school and the project can not be understated; there is real power in this organization.

Fantastic Follow Through parents were represented on the Research Team (described earlier) which had developed an informal advisory role with regard to school programs and policies.

The Project LINC Advisory Committee, which includes parent representatives, plays a strong advisory role to the Project Director and Principal on matters of school policy and programs. The Advisory Committee created a Parent Involvement Committee with the specific charge of recommending short and long term strategies for programs, resources, and opportunities to expand parent involvement. Because the Advisory Committee has successfully attracted local business and community leaders, there is the potential for this body to support an increased level of parent advocacy regarding district-wide school policy decisions.

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The mentors assisted teachers in class, and were engaged in a range of activities including tutoring math and writing, teaching chess, and organizing athletic events.

High School Mentors

All three programs recruited minority male high school students to assist teachers with classroom activities and to provide positive role models for the children. In general, both the teachers and the mentors rate this program component highly, and comment on the strong bonds that developed between students and mentors.

The key aspects of the implementation of the mentor program include the criteria by which mentors were selected, the roles that were designed for the mentors, and the process for supervision and support of the mentors. These are discussed below.

Selection Criteria and Roles: During the first two years at Learning for Life, many mentors were students considered "at risk" who were selected for the mentor program for the anticipated benefit the experience might have on them. Midtown West teachers found working with such students challenging for a number of reasons, including inconsistent attendance. In its third year, Learning for Life adjusted its selection process so that the eight student mentors were chosen on the basis of strong academic record and attendance. As a result, their attendance and participation greatly improved. The mentors assisted teachers in class, and were engaged in a range of activities including tutoring math and writing, teaching chess, and organizing athletic events.

Fantastic Follow Through mentors were selected primarily if they were judged to have the potential to be good role models for the children. Participation, averaging five to nine hours per week for each student in the fall semesters, dropped significantly in the spring semesters. Their functions in Fantastic Follow Through depended on their cooperating teachers, and often included tutoring students and reading stories.

Project LINC mentors, all minority juniors and seniors at Ruston High School (RHS), were selected using screening criteria that included an average or better GPA, the desire to render service, positive peer relationships, and involvement in at least one other organization or activity. The program sought

to recruit motivated and accomplished mentors who could provide positive role models. The 10 to 15 mentors visited Lincoln Center three hours per week during their lunch periods and participated in field trips and both classroom and playground activities. Attendance was very consistent, exceeding 85-90% for most mentors.

Supervision and Support: At Learning for Life, there were three Mentor Advisors initially: one each from three of the secondary schools from which the mentors were drawn. The Advisor from Hudson River Middle School (one of the schools that shares the Midtown West building) played a key role in adapting the mentor program over the three years of the grant, and is now the sole Mentor Advisor. He provides orientations for mentors, and meets periodically with mentors and teachers to discuss progress and concerns, and to plan future directions.

Learning for Life mentors were initially required to check-in and/or meet with a spectrum of advisors, including a variety of staff at Midtown West as well as an advisor at their home school. There was concern that this arrangement was unduly complicated and undermined the key supervisory relationship between the mentor and the classroom teacher. The program was redesigned so that mentors reported directly to their cooperating teachers, and periodically to the Mentor Advisor. The mentors, however, expressed a desire for greater integration into the school community, specifically participation in staff meetings and curriculum workshops.

Fantastic Follow Through mentors attended a single orientation session covering tutoring techniques, educational strategies, and developmental principles at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Mentors also met individually with their cooperating teachers and with the Mentor Coordinator at their home school.

Project LINC high school mentors were recruited with the help of the Assistant Principal at RHS, who served as Mentor Coordinator. Mentors received monthly training on providing guidance to students and designing educational activities. Training also included career information in the field of early childhood education. In addition, mentors had the opportunity

The 10 to 15 mentors visited Lincoln Center three hours per week during their lunch periods and participated in field trips and both classroom and playground activities. Attendance was very consistent, exceeding 85-90% for most mentors.

The interns assisted teachers, worked directly with children, and interacted with parents during various school meetings.

to visit with the college interns and other university students majoring in education, and were taken on a field trip to Louisiana Tech University to visit the facilities.

College Interns

Interns from area colleges were brought into each program to assist in teaching, and also to provide input on curriculum and teaching methods. The level of collaboration between the projects and their higher education partners impacted the training and utilization of both interns and mentors. The backgrounds of the interns, their roles at the schools, and the structure for supervision and support are described below.

Backgrounds and Roles of the Interns: Learning for Life utilized two or three Bank Street students as interns each year of the program. All were minorities, and all but one male. Other education students (some from universities other than Bank Street) are placed as student teachers at Midtown West three days per week. The roles of the interns and student teachers are similar: both assist with all classroom activities, and periodically lead activities, at the direction of their cooperating teachers.

Interns at Fantastic Follow Through were identified through an application process that was publicized by word-of-mouth and posted flyers. After selection and training, they were primarily utilized to tutor students individually or in small groups.

Project LINC was able to attract many college interns (64 in 1991-92, 90 in 1992-93, and 94 enrolled for 1993-94) who were placed at Lincoln Center for 27 hours per quarter. All interns were either upper division undergraduate or graduate students in early childhood education at Louisiana Tech, and their internships were part of academic requirements. All but one were female and approximately 5% were black. The interns assisted teachers, worked directly with children, and interacted with parents during various school meetings.

Supervision and Support: Interns at Learning for Life received supervision from both Bank Street and Midtown West

faculty. The interns participated in supervision meetings with their cooperating teacher along with the Bank Street Coordinator for Professional Development. All interns met with the school's Director, and participated in staff development activities with their cooperating teachers.

Fantastic Follow Through interns, like the high school mentors, received training from Virginia Commonwealth University, consisting of a single orientation session covering tutoring techniques, educational strategies, and developmental principles. Interns also received training individually from their cooperating teachers and from the Home/School Coordinator.

Since Project LINC's Program Director is also Coordinator of the ECEC and teaches the academic classes from which interns were drawn, she was well positioned to ensure that the needs of both the interns and Lincoln Center staff were being met. She met individually with interns to augment their university course work.

Family Services

In considering the family service component, it is important to consider two categories of activity:

- ***Direct Services***, i.e. efforts to identify and address the medical, psychological, and other service needs of individual students and their families;
- ***Training and Information***, i.e. group activities such as training and/or the dissemination of information regarding family services.

The activities undertaken by the three Excellent Beginnings sites in these two categories are described below.

The Learning for Life Family Service Coordinator would receive inquiries or requests for services from children, parents, teachers, or the Midtown West Director. These requests primarily concerned perceived academic, social, or attendance

Fantastic Follow Through interns, like the high school mentors, received training from Virginia Commonwealth University, consisting of a single orientation session covering tutoring techniques, educational strategies, and developmental principles.

The work of the Parent Educators was a combination of promoting school-based volunteering and other educational support activities, and direct outreach to parents for family service opportunities such as parenting skills training and individual service referrals.

problems among particular students. Occasionally, cases would focus on the parents directly, as in the case of one battered woman who sought counseling. The Family Service Coordinator would refer the families to one of several community-based service agencies in the neighborhood.

The Learning for Life Center made community and family resource materials available for all parents. A Family Resource Guide was assembled to list the local agencies and other resources available to families including hotlines for child abuse, domestic violence, welfare emergencies, child care, parent counseling, homeless services and food pantries, elderly services, Latino services, etc.

The family service component of the Fantastic Follow Through program centered on home visitation by the Parent Educators, as described earlier. The work of the Parent Educators was a combination of promoting school-based volunteering and other educational support activities, and direct outreach to parents for family service opportunities such as parenting skills training and individual service referrals.

Project LINC regularly distributes a variety of printed materials in an effort to inform all parents of available family services. These outreach materials, along with parent meetings and social events, were also used to identify specific needs among the children and parents and to make appropriate referrals. Many of the agencies had previous contact with the Project Director and were represented on the Advisory Committee. This ensured that the agencies were aware of the goals of Project LINC and that there were open lines of communication between the school community and the local service providers.

Observations and Conclusions Regarding Project Implementation

The site evaluation reports contain many findings regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of project implementation at the three sites. These observations and conclusions can

be grouped into a number of categories, which are presented and described below.

Constituencies, Resources, and Beneficiaries: A particularly exciting aspect of Excellent Beginnings, both in its conceptualization and its implementation, is the recognition of the full range of constituencies important to the development of successful early childhood education programs. These constituencies include the children themselves, their parents and teachers, high school and college students and faculty, community agencies and higher education institutions. In addition, successful program implementation is based on the recognition that many of these constituencies are both service delivery resources and service beneficiaries. For example, parents serve as classroom volunteers or advisory committee members, and as such can provide valuable resources to children and teachers. But they can also receive training and counseling to improve their own skills and understanding. Similarly, the high school mentors, who have been a central aspect of project implementation in all three sites, are an enormous positive resource for the children, but also claim an equally significant benefit themselves. The recognition of each participant's dual role as a "provider" and "client" is at the core of successful collaborations and true partnerships.

In addition to understanding the needs as well as potential contributions of all relevant school and community constituencies, it is also important to recognize that each constituency needs active outreach and cultivation in order to secure their complete "buy-in" to the project. This includes establishing appropriate vehicles to assess their needs and interests as well as to facilitate their participation. It also includes regular, timely, complete, and accurate communication about project activities. While all three sites focused substantial energy on cultivating and encouraging parents, it is noteworthy that, for example, Project LINC in Ruston was unique in distributing its newsletter to all teachers at the high school from which the mentors are drawn. This generated interest in the project among high school faculty, and a related willingness on their part to be flexible and helpful regarding scheduling and other matters that would facilitate and support the mentor program.

Parents serve as classroom volunteers or advisory committee members, and as such can provide valuable resources to children and teachers. But they can also receive training and counseling to improve their own skills and understanding.

In Richmond, Professor Virgie Binford is a dramatic example of this type of leadership. As cheerleader and advocate, elder stateswoman and role model, political strategist and program advisor, she has served effectively as the link among all school-based and community constituencies and is a strong, visible presence at Fairfield Court Elementary School.

The Power of the Individual: Each of the three projects, in one way or another, demonstrated the ability of an exceptional individual (on the basis of personality, skill, expertise, or enthusiasm) to inspire people and to make an impact somehow larger than their assigned or assumed role. The Project Directors were often characterized by participants in these terms, and their leadership is absolutely necessary for successful project implementation and follow-through. However, there were other individuals involved in the projects whose role and impact were extremely positive. Their contributions can be intangible but very substantial, informal but widely recognized, subtle but powerful and resonant within the cultures of the school and the community.

In Richmond, Professor Virgie Binford is a dramatic example of this type of leadership. As cheerleader and advocate, elder stateswoman and role model, political strategist and program advisor, she has served effectively as the link among all school and community constituencies and is a strong, visible presence at Fairfield Court Elementary School. Attracting and engaging such an individual can be an immense strength for an Excellent Beginnings project. The absence of this type of leadership, particularly in settings in which the Project Director is less than full-time, can be a serious barrier or constraint.

Phasing and Sequencing: Projects such as Excellent Beginnings which seek to significantly alter a variety of practices, attitudes, and behaviors in several diverse target groups, must take a long-range view of their activities and objectives. It is therefore important to recognize that there are appropriate sequences for the implementation of various activities, and that some aspects of the project need to be phased in at an appropriate time. On the basis of the experience at the three sites, it is indicated that the family service component can be successful if built on a strong foundation of structured parent involvement, implying the need to sequence these components in a multi-year implementation plan. Also, the training needs of teachers and parents change over a three-year period, suggesting the need for a training plan and workshop schedule that recognizes the varying needs of teachers and parents, and that applies a multi-year approach. In these three sites, an adequate

awareness of these phasing and sequencing issues did not seem to be incorporated into program planning.

The Importance of the Higher Education Connection: There are a number of important roles envisioned for a participating higher education institution in the implementation of Excellent Beginnings. Key among these is providing educational leadership and expertise, specifically with regard to current curriculum development and teaching practice. Training for teachers, together with individualized follow-up and coaching, must be an ongoing and routine aspect of project implementation. Organizationally, there must be a strong and high level relationship between the school and the higher education institution that can ensure the long-term availability of curriculum and staff development resources for teachers, administrators, and parents.

In all three sites, there was a burst of energy and activity on this front during the first year of Excellent Beginnings. However, in two sites (Richmond and New York), the university's commitment and involvement waned in years two and three. The reasons given for these diminishing levels of university activity include the existence of other institutional priorities, financial constraints, and a lack of clarity about roles and expectations. The success of the Ruston site in establishing and maintaining a strong and productive relationship with its university partner, Louisiana Tech, is rooted in several key factors:

- There was a written agreement that specified the relationship.
- The Project Director is also the Coordinator of the College Early Childhood Education Center Program and, as such, is the direct administrative link to the relevant university resources.

Organizationally, there must be a strong and high level relationship between the school and the higher education institution that can insure the long-term availability of curriculum and staff development resources for teachers, administrators, and parents.

Successful implementation requires developing new organizational structures and relationships, training and supporting a number of diverse constituencies to insure their active and productive participation, and monitoring and assessing school-related activities and their outcomes in a number of new and different ways.

- Louisiana Tech's new president has reaffirmed the commitment to community service expressed in the university's mission, and has put a renewed emphasis on developing and supporting a diversified base of grant funding, thereby positioning participation in Excellent Beginnings squarely within the priorities of the university.

Thinking About Priorities: The Excellent Beginnings model has been designed as a comprehensive approach that includes curriculum and teaching innovation, significant and meaningful parent involvement, extensive collaboration with community institutions, the creative use of mentors and interns, and the development of a network of agencies through which to provide medical, psychological, and other social services to children and families. Successful implementation requires developing new organizational structures and relationships, training and supporting a number of diverse constituencies to ensure their active and productive participation, and monitoring and assessing school-related activities and their outcomes in a number of new and different ways.

Given the comprehensive vision of Excellent Beginnings, it becomes important for participating schools to establish priorities both for their implementation of the various components and for undertaking specific activities within the components. This is particularly important given a three-year grant cycle and implementation horizon. For example, an Excellent Beginnings site may determine that teacher training and parent involvement are priorities in the first year, and that the implementation of the family service network and the utilization of high school mentors should be slated for implementation in a subsequent year. Similarly, a site may decide that, with regard to parent involvement, training and coordinating classroom volunteers and conducting home visits to parents are year one priorities, and that convening an advisory council as the vehicle for parent advocacy is a secondary priority that can be addressed in years two and three.

In general, the three sites did not establish implementation priorities on the basis of formal needs assessment and planning

activities. Specific activities did receive varying degrees of energy and attention over the course of the three years of implementation, and these de facto priorities seem based on the inclinations of the participants and the circumstances of the school, rather than any careful analysis.

The Lessons of the Family Service Component: Across all three sites, the family service component is clearly the weakest aspect of project implementation. There has been some parent training in topics related to medical and psychological health, coupled with the distribution of information about local service resources and, in only a few cases, referrals to community-based service providers. However, at no site were the key aspects of a *system* for coordinated family services put in place to a significant degree. The elements of such a system include:

- a structured process for identifying family service needs;
- a formal network of community-based family service resources with a multi-faceted role that includes training, planning, advising, and service delivery;
- a system of follow-up or case management to ensure that the identified needs are being appropriately and effectively met.

The reasons for the pervasive weakness of this component appear to be related to a lack of understanding of the full range of administrative and programmatic components necessary for such an endeavor. Building a family service system as characterized above requires forging new and unfamiliar organizational relationships and revising one's basic conceptual understanding of the role of schools in meeting the needs of children and families. Isolated activities without a systemic framework simply cannot have a significant impact. For example, the development and distribution of a resource directory without a structured process for outreach, training, and follow-up.

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Not only was there a considerable increase in the number of parents visibly active at the school, there was an unprecedented number of parents who decided to pursue their high school equivalency diploma (GED) after having participated in various Excellent Beginnings activities.

Project Impact And Outcomes

Overview

The Site Evaluators, in analyzing project implementation and impact, sought to creatively identify both statistical/quantitative and anecdotal/qualitative indicators of impact. For example, while attendance and test scores are two common measures for identifying and quantifying student performance and motivation, there are many other aspects of school climate, classroom activities and student behavior that can be systematically observed and recorded that also provide useful insights into a project's impact with students.

The evaluation methodology was designed to document the impact of the project on:

- students (in terms of achievement and skill development, motivation, engagement, behavior, etc.);
- parents (in terms of their involvement and engagement, attitudes, skill development, etc.);
- school faculty and staff (in terms of attitudes, teaching practice, skill development, etc.);
- the high school mentors (in terms of attitudes, behaviors, achievement, outlook, etc.);
- school structures and systems (including any permanent and/or institutionalized change).

Testimony was provided by teachers, parents, mentors, etc. that the combined effect of the program components greatly enhanced the feelings and attitudes of the students about school and about themselves.

Observations and Conclusions Regarding Project Impact

Excellent Beginnings is credited by project participants in all three sites with generating a range of very significant impacts and outcomes. These include improved student performance, motivation, and engagement, as well as a variety of institutional impacts related to school climate, the availability of educational resources, and the relationships between the schools and their communities. Specific areas of impact are addressed in more detail below.

The Impact on Students: The various impacts of Excellent Beginnings on students can be grouped into two categories: personal (including self-esteem, motivation, enthusiasm for learning, etc.); and academic (including performance, achievement, cognitive development, etc.).

All three site evaluations include substantial anecdotal evidence regarding the strong positive impact of the project on student emotional engagement in school-related activities, their personal commitment to school and to learning, and their confidence and self-esteem. Testimony was provided by teachers, parents, mentors, etc. that the combined effect of the program components (developmentally appropriate curriculum and classroom practice, the utilization of high school mentors and college interns, and the multi-dimensional involvement of parents) greatly enhanced the feelings and attitudes of the students about school and about themselves.

In addition, the site evaluation reports include a number of strong suggestions that the project had an equally positive impact on student academic performance and achievement. In Richmond, increases in student test scores were documented over the three year period of the grant. In Ruston, the percentage of students promoted to the next grade level were significantly higher than during the years preceding Excellent Beginnings. In New York, high percentages of students successfully achieved the school's seven key learning outcomes during the three years of the grant. These findings are impressive and important.

However, the documentation of the impact of Excellent Beginnings on student learning is far from complete. There needs to be a more systematic and comprehensive gathering and compilation of data regarding student academic performance and cognitive development so that comparative studies can be done and the actual impact of specific activities can be firmly ascertained. This issue will be addressed in greater detail in the recommendations section of this report.

The Impact on Parents: The project's positive impact on parents has been dramatic. Participating parents express and demonstrate substantially changed attitudes about their children's school, about the role of parents in their children's education, and about their own futures. The project has also had a significant effect on parents' skill development and self-esteem.

In understanding the impact of the project on parents, let us first consider the schools where there had been a strong track record of formal parent involvement prior to Excellent Beginnings. Midtown West in New York has had an active Parent Association since the school's inception, and Fairfield Court in Richmond has had a long-standing program of parent educators who work with parents in a number of ways, including home visits.

In both these sites, the comprehensive approach to parent involvement embodied in the Excellent Beginnings model extended and enhanced the participation of parents. For example, in New York, there was a significant expansion of parent volunteerism (it was estimated by one teacher that approximately 75% of all parents have assisted in a classroom at one time or another) and the quality of parent involvement was increased due to the many training opportunities provided to parents under Excellent Beginnings. In Richmond, not only was there a considerable increase in the number of parents visibly active at the school, there was an unprecedented number of parents who decided to pursue their high school equivalency diploma (GED) after having participated in various Excellent Beginnings activities.

Participating parents express and demonstrate substantially changed attitudes about their children's school, about the role of parents in their children's education, and about their own futures.

The changes include a greater focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional techniques, and a greater openness to the use of parent volunteers and other community resources.

While their experiences as mentors did not necessarily instill in them a desire to be teachers, it did make them think about and look forward to being fathers.

At Lincoln Center in Ruston, where there was not an equivalent historical track record of parent involvement, there was even more dramatic evidence of increased participation on the part of parents, including classroom volunteering, attendance at workshops and other activities, and active involvement in school-related committees.

The Impact on Teachers: All three site evaluations include descriptions of significant changes in teachers' classroom practice as a result of Excellent Beginnings. These changes include a greater focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional techniques, and a greater openness to the use of parent volunteers and other community resources. Overall, the project created resources for teachers, and the teachers then responded to these new opportunities to upgrade their skills and improve the effectiveness of their teaching. This has been true even in cases where there was some initial reluctance on the part of veteran teachers.

The Impact on the High School Mentors: The experiences of the high school mentors, in all three sites, were very clear examples of situations in which a "service provider" benefits as much, if not more, than his "clients." The mentors (all minority males, by design) are characterized by faculty and parents as having contributed greatly to the education of the children. But the mentors also gained a tremendous amount on the basis of their participation. They unanimously claim to have developed a greater sense of responsibility, a better understanding of the academic and emotional needs of young children, and an appreciation for the skill, patience, and hard work necessary to be an effective teacher. While their experiences as mentors did not necessarily instill in them a desire to be teachers, it did make them think about and look forward to being fathers.

It is noteworthy that some sites experimented with recruiting "at-risk" high school students as mentors so that this group could benefit from the experience in the ways described above. This proved not to be an effective strategy primarily because of problems with reliability. The program is most effective, with the young children and with the mentors themselves, when mentors are selected on the basis of good attendance and generally positive performance in school.

Upgrading the Image of a School: In all three sites, an important outcome of the project was the upgrading of the image, reputation, and overall desirability of the host schools. It is important to note that the three sites, prior to Excellent Beginnings, represented a broad range of reputations. Lincoln Center's reputation was that of a "dumping ground" and as the district's "black" school; Fairfield Court was known as a school that encouraged parent involvement, through the vehicle of its parent educators, but that served a difficult and predominantly low-income population; and Midtown West was a college-affiliated "option" school but, as a newly established school, was viewed as somewhat unproven.

The improvement in the image and reputation of these three schools can be attributed to some extent to the comprehensive approach embodied in the Excellent Beginnings model. In these schools, curriculum and teaching practice was improved, parents were encouraged to become involved in a number of different ways and were provided with relevant training, children regularly interacted with adult male role models, and there were a variety of programs and activities that made the school more of a center of community or neighborhood life.

The combined effect of these diverse aspects of the project was to engender in the parents a greater level of comfort and sense of pride in the school, as well as feelings of optimism about their children's education. In addition, there was a significant increase in the level of interest among others in the community who wanted to enroll their children in the school. (As mentioned earlier in this report, the significant changes in composition of the student body at Lincoln Center in Ruston can be strongly attributed to the changes in the image, reputation, and desirability of the school as a result of Excellent Beginnings.)

Creating a "New Day" at the Participating School: The most significant institutional impact of Excellent Beginnings for the three school sites is the creation of a "new day," a new way of doing business, from which the schools can not retreat. A

The improvement in the image and reputation of these three schools can be attributed to some extent to the comprehensive approach embodied in the Excellent Beginnings model.

number of explicit expectations have been successfully established: expectations of extensive and varied parent involvement, of developmentally appropriate classroom practice, and of opening the schools to the resources of the communities. These are now permanent components of each school's programmatic and administrative infrastructure, and will be regarded, by parents, teachers, and the community at-large, as necessary and fundamental for many years to come.

Observations:

- ▶ *There was strong positive impact of the project on student emotional engagement in school-related activities and their personal commitment to school and to learning.*
- ▶ *Participating parents demonstrate substantially changed attitudes about their children's school and the role of parents in their children's education.*
- ▶ *Significant changes have taken place in teachers' classroom practice as a result of Excellent Beginnings, including a greater focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional techniques.*
- ▶ *High school mentors unanimously claim to have gained a greater sense of responsibility and an appreciation for the skill, patience, and hard work necessary to be an effective teacher.*
- ▶ *There were a variety of programs and activities that made the school more of a center of community or neighborhood life.*

It is critical for the project to develop a standardized set of quantifiable indicators, and the related data gathering instruments and protocols, so that there can be a systematic analysis of the implementation of the project.

Recommendations

Overview

The evaluation process has been designed to generate several types of recommendations:

- recommendations to the sites themselves that are designed to improve their implementation of various project components;
- recommendations to the Plan for Social Excellence regarding its decisions about funding these three sites for another three-year cycle;
- recommendations that guide and inform replication of the project in additional sites.

It is important to note that these categories of recommendations are not mutually exclusive. For example, a recommendation for improved implementation to a site might parallel a recommendation to a school seeking to replicate the project.

Themes Embodied in the Recommendations

There are a number of strong themes that emerge from the recommendations offered in the site evaluations. These themes are relevant both to the existing sites and to potential new sites for the project, and provide a good deal of useful information to the staff, directors, and advisors of the Plan for Social Excellence as they consider the future of Excellent

There is additional statistical information that could be collected and compiled in an effort to quantify project implementation and/or impact (such as classroom observation notes, parent center utilization logs, teacher lesson plans, etc.).

Beginnings. The themes embodied in the recommendations are:

Data Collection: A major concern about the implementation of Excellent Beginnings is the relative lack of hard data upon which to develop an accurate assessment of the project's impact and effectiveness. The statistical information about student performance and behavior that school systems routinely assemble (such as attendance, test scores, promotion rates, disciplinary records, etc.), in general do not appear to be systematically compiled and analyzed in a manner that would facilitate an assessment of any particular school program or initiative. Similarly, there is additional statistical information that could be collected and compiled in an effort to quantify project implementation and/or impact (such as classroom observation notes, parent center utilization logs, teacher lesson plans, etc.). However, this information is often not formally or systematically collected or compiled. In some cases, such data exists only for the period of the implementation of the grant with no baseline comparative data.

It is critical for the project to develop a standardized set of quantifiable indicators, and the related data gathering instruments and protocols, so that there can be a systematic analysis of the implementation of the project and the correlation between specific programmatic components and the desired student outcomes. A commitment to this standardized data gathering must be a condition of Excellent Beginnings funding.

Setting Priorities: This issue of priorities was addressed in some detail in the section of this report on project implementation. It is recommended that Excellent Beginnings sites establish priorities for implementation across and within the core components of the project, and develop corresponding multi-year implementation timetables that reflect those priorities.

Participant Orientation and Training: A greater level of attention needs to be given to the complete body of orientation, training, technical assistance, and support necessary for the effective involvement of each of the key constituent groups:

parents, teachers, administrators, community agency representatives, mentors and interns. A systematic approach to the preparation of participants for their role(s), whether it be instructional support, administrative assistance, advisory input, or project governance, will have the impact of both increasing the effectiveness of their involvement and establishing a sense of shared ownership and common purpose.

Integration of Project Components: The site evaluation reports expressed concern, to varying degrees, about the fragmentation of project implementation. While each component consists of important and appropriate activities, they do not necessarily comprise a unified whole. For example, there can be a stronger focus on conducting joint planning and/or training activities involving both teachers and parents, or there can be a greater integration of mentors into the life of the school beyond their classroom assistant role. It is recommended that Project Advisory Councils or Steering Committees more proactively plan and coordinate the implementation of project components to insure the most efficient and mutually re-enforcing utilization of resources.

Key Recommendations:

- ▶ *It is critical for the project to develop a standardized set of quantifiable indicators, and the related data gathering instruments and protocols.*
- ▶ *Excellent Beginnings sites need to establish priorities for implementation across and within the core components of the project.*
- ▶ *A greater level of attention needs to be given to the complete body of orientation, training, technical assistance, and support.*
- ▶ *Project Advisory Councils or Steering Committees should more proactively plan and coordinate the implementation of project components.*

It is possible to generate positive outcomes with young children and their families even with only partial implementation of the Excellent Beginnings model.

Overall Conclusion

The first phase of the Excellent Beginnings funding initiative has been a useful and effective test of the model developed by the Plan for Social Excellence for upgrading early childhood education programs. This report, and a more detailed companion document to follow, provides many valuable lessons for communities assessing their early childhood education programs and considering the development of their own Excellent Beginnings project.

On the evidence provided by the three initial Excellent Beginnings sites, it is possible to generate positive outcomes with young children and their families even with only partial implementation of the Excellent Beginnings model. However, real long-term effectiveness requires a comprehensive approach. Early childhood education programs must ultimately incorporate the full range of components that define Excellent Beginnings. Complete implementation includes: innovative and proven curriculum and classroom strategies; systematic and multi-faceted parent involvement; the integration of positive role models into the lives of children; and the development of a system that ensures access to family service resources. These are not freestanding program modules but a comprehensive, integrated approach.

The upcoming phase of Excellent Beginnings, including enhancing the work of the current sites as well as developing new sites, is important and exciting. The findings and recommendations contained in this report can play a significant role in improving project implementation. In addition, they support and extend the Plan's mission to invest in programs that are demonstrated to work.

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